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God Gladdens Our Soul

Psalm 86.1-4

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For those celebrating Mother's Day, I hope you have a wonderful day. The origins of Mother's Day in the United States date back to the 19th century. In the years before the Civil War, **Ann Reeves Jarvis** of West Virginia helped start "Mothers' Day Work Clubs" to teach local women how to properly care for their children. These clubs later became a unifying force in a region of the country divided over the Civil War. In **1868** Jarvis organized "Mothers' Friendship Day," at which mothers gathered with former Union and Confederate soldiers to promote reconciliation.

Another precursor to Mother's Day came from abolitionist, suffragette, and poet Julia Ward Howe who is remembered for writing The Battle Hymn of the Republic in 1861. In **1870** Howe wrote the "Mother's Day Proclamation," a call to action that asked mothers to unite in promoting world peace. In **1873** Howe campaigned for a "Mother's Peace Day" to be celebrated every June 2.

Mother's Day was observed in Ann Jarvis's Methodist Church in West Virginia and quickly spread more broadly and focused on properly caring for babies, ensuring sanitation, building hospitals and peace work. **The desire to nurture — to provide care and encourage growth** is something we appreciate and value in so many mothers, and not just human mother's, we see it in so many of God's creatures. An article in The Cape Codder about helping to prevent wildlife orphans stated emphatically, "*Squirrels are attentive mothers!*"

I'm blessed to be married to Jill who is a wonderful mother to our sons and I'm thankful I had a very good relationship with my mother as well. I know that isn't the case for everyone and I'm sorry about that and pray for those for whom that relationship needs grace, mercy, forgiveness, and healing. My mother died in 2009 and I still think of her. One of things I loved about my mother was her sense of humor. My mom **laughed easily and frequently** and had a wonderful smile. She had a quote on her refrigerator, "***A smile is a light in the window of the soul indicating that the heart is at home.***" I was always happy to preach at a worship service with my mother present because I knew if I said something funny, I'd hear her laugh.

Laughter isn't always the first thing some people associate with worship in church. One of the things we see in reading the Bible is that sometimes people are silent before God in worship, and other times they're praising God with every instrument they can get their hands on. Sometimes, people are lamenting and crying out to God in their pain, heartache, or suffering, and other times, gladness, joy, and thanksgiving are the primary emotions people express as they come to worship and pray. This teaches you that you can bring all your emotions to God including gladness and laughter.

In the movie, *Pollyanna*, Hayley Mills plays the title character and in one scene she has a conversation with the pastor played by Karl Malden. Earlier in the movie we experience him preaching in a way that is angry, harsh, and hard to listen to. In their chat she mentions to him "The Glad Passages" (the happy ones) – sharing that her father had researched and discovered 800 "Rejoicing Texts" mentioned in The Bible. Pollyanna says, **"...if God took the trouble to tell us eight hundred times to be glad and rejoice, He must want us to do it – SOME."** I agree with her. One of the attributes of God is that **God gladdens our soul** which is what the Psalmist is asking God to do once again in **Psalm 86:1-4**.

"Incline your ear, O LORD, and answer me, for I am poor and needy.

Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you; save your servant who trusts in you.

You are my God; be gracious to me, O Lord, for to you do I cry all day long.

Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul."

God Gladdens Our Soul – When we worship and lift our soul to the Lord.

Pollyanna is correct that there are a lot of passages that tell us to be glad and rejoice. One is **Psalm 100**, which begins, **"Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness;"** Let me tell you what *"worship the Lord with gladness"* means in Hebrew...it means worship the Lord with gladness. I'm grateful there are a fair amount of people connected to BBC who would say as **Psalm 122:1** does, **"I was glad when they said unto me, let us go to the house of the Lord."** Would people observing you say you were glad to be going to worship? For those of you in the sanctuary, we have video of you walking to the building. Let's look at the screen and see who truly looked glad coming to worship. We didn't do that, but if you

got a little nervous, maybe focusing on how God gladdens your soul might be a good idea.

If you're watching online, I hope you do so with a sense of anticipation, hope, and gladness. I have encountered the attitude or belief in some people that seems like the more serious and sadder you look the holier you are. I'm not saying we deny the hurt, hardship or heartache in our life when we worship God. Every person is carrying a burden you don't know about. There is great suffering, injustice, and pain in the world that can easily lead you to feel depressed and hopeless. However, part of what helps you get through all that is the ability to lift your soul to God in worship and for God to gladden your soul. It pleases God when you take delight in worshiping the Lord. Worshiping the Lord with gladness presupposes a relationship that makes you want to be there. Taking time to lift your soul to God reminds you there is a God who loves you, who thinks you're precious and wants you to see everyone else that way too, who wants the best for you, pushes you to grow, and who blesses you every day if you have eyes to see and ears to hear.

There are many reasons why millions of people, especially younger people want nothing to do with the church in the United States. One of the reasons is because many people who claim to be Christian don't seem to be glad or happy. They appear angry, mad, judgmental, self-righteous, arrogant, uncaring, snide, and condescending, rather than glad, loving, and kind. They find little to celebrate about life in this world, and then are surprised that other people don't want to join them. This is very different than the perspective of **Psalm 92:4** that began our service: ***“For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy.”***

If you can't find any reasons to be glad in the beginning of May in the northern hemisphere with the leaves coming out, green flooding our vision everywhere we look, the tulips and daffodils in bloom, the cherry blossoms bursting forth, the days getting longer and warmer, I mean, I don't know what to say. Yet **Psalm 4** expresses that there is a gladness found in a relationship with God even beyond the gladness that comes with abundant food and drink that God has provided through the bounty of creation. **Psalm 4:7**, ***“You have put gladness in my heart, More than when their grain and new wine abound.”***

My mother liked a lot of Bible verses and one of her favorites was **Psalm 118:24**, ***“This is the day the Lord has made. I will rejoice and be glad in it.”*** As Christians we worship a God who gladdens our soul and while we all have different temperaments and personalities and we recognize the suffering and pain in the world, it’s still true that we can choose each day to be a person of joy and gladness. Look for reasons to be glad, grateful, appreciative, and thankful every day, even with the challenges you’re facing, and I promise you, you’ll find them, and it will start to change your attitude and your perspective.

Chapters 15, 16, and 17, in the Gospel of John include Jesus’ final major speech to his disciples and perhaps his most important prayer to God. These are the words of a teacher to his students on the night before his violent, painful death.

They are not spoken as a master to servants, but from one friend to another.

They are the words of someone who is going to die to those he loves and who love him.

One could say many things in such a situation.

You might speak of the injustice and unfairness of it all and feel sorry for yourself.

You could speak angrily of revenge. You could lament your unfortunate condition before God and within earshot of everyone else to gain sympathy.

You could speak words of assurance and comfort, appreciation, and hope.

It might come as somewhat of a surprise in this situation to hear words of joy.

Yet Jesus speaks of joy not once or twice but three times in these chapters.

Three times he speaks, not of an occasional burst of happiness but of complete joy.

This is what Jesus says in **John 15:11, 16:22-24, 17:13**,

“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. On that day you will ask nothing of me.

Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.

Until now you have not asked for anything in my name.

Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.

But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.”

Jesus wants us to have the complete joy that comes from a transforming relationship with the loving and gracious God who gives us life. As we are united with Jesus through his word, prayer, and loving obedience the result in our lives will be joy.

If you've got the joy of Jesus down in your heart, it should show on your face. Dennis Prager in his book, *Happiness Is a Serious Problem*, shares this experience:

"I once asked a deeply religious man if he considered himself a truly pious person. He responded that while he aspired to be one, he felt that he fell short in two areas. One of those areas, he said, was his **not being a happy enough person** to be considered truly pious.

"His point was that unhappy religious people reflect poorly on their religion and on their Creator. He was right; in fact, unhappy religious people pose a real challenge to faith. If their faith is so impressive, why aren't these devoted adherents happy? There are only two possible reasons: either they are not practicing their faith correctly, or they are practicing their faith correctly and the religion itself is not conducive to happiness. Most outsiders assume the latter reason. Unhappy religious people should therefore think about how important being happy is – if not for themselves, then for the sake of their religion. **Unhappy, let alone angry, religious people provide more persuasive arguments for atheism and secularism than do all the arguments of atheists.**"

While joy and happiness are not the same, following Jesus is conducive to joy, so if you practice your faith correctly, the fruit of joy will begin to grow and become increasingly evident in your life over time. If you have the joy of Jesus in your life, (through hearing his word, prayer, and loving obedience); you'll be better able to face even in the challenging and heart-breaking times.

If we hope to share the good news of God's love in Christ with other people, then we should remember that Christians who walk around looking like they've been sucking on lemons all day aren't likely to convince other people how wonderful it is to be a follower of Christ. I like the gospel song *If You're Happy Notify Your Face* that says:
 If you're happy notify your face
 Take that frown off and put a smile in its place.
 If you love Jesus, well show it to the human race.
 If you're happy notify your face

We go to many meetings see Christians everywhere.
 We sing and talk of Jesus and how it'll be up there.
 We talk of all the burdens confronting the human race.
 And say our Jesus is the answer with a frown all over our face.

We claim we've got the answer to everything that's wrong.
 Then sit in church impatiently when services get long.
 Then we go out in the world with faces sad and mean
 And it's no wonder folks won't listen that Jesus is supreme.

I don't say all this to put a load of guilt on you, especially on those of you who are coping with the loss of a loved one or difficulties known and unknown. However, the truth remains that Jesus radiated joy; it's part of what made him attractive to all kinds of people: children and adults, the troubled, the grieving, tax collectors, people from all walks of life with all kinds of issues. About the only people who didn't like Jesus were the religious people who thought Jesus hung around with the wrong crowd, went to too many parties, and gave God a bad name. He who knew no sin had a personality overflowing with gladness.

Perhaps it's little consolation, but we should remember that Jesus wasn't delivered from suffering or spared the cross; just as some of our loved ones or you were not spared other circumstances. It's appropriate to pray for healing, help, and deliverance, but it's even more important to pray for the heart, mind, and joy of Jesus in your circumstances whatever they are.

Paul says the second fruit of the spirit is **Joy**. His Letter to the Philippians is known for its emphasis on joy and he writes it **from prison** to a church that's experiencing some division and conflict and he tells the church to (Philippians 4:4) ***"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"***

1 Chronicles 16:27 describes what it's like in the presence of God, ***"Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and Joy in his dwelling place."***

Psalms 16:11 declares, ***"In your presence there is fullness of joy."***

Martin Luther said, ***"If you're not allowed to laugh in heaven, I don't want to go there."*** Amen to that.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What comes to mind for you when you hear the word gladness? Are there any people in your life you associate with gladness? What is appealing about gladness?
2. Has your experience of and approach to Christianity been more like that of the pastor (Karl Malden) or Pollyanna (Hayley Mills) referenced in the sermon from the movie *Pollyanna*?
3. How does “lifting up our soul” to God on a regular basis help to gladden our soul?
4. Why is it important for Christians to be people who demonstrate love, joy, gladness, and kindness? What impact does demonstrating or failing to demonstrate these qualities have in our witness to non-Christians?
5. Why do you think Jesus speaks of joy three times during his final evening with the disciples in John chapter’s 15-17 (see page 4 of the sermon)? What do you take from his statements that can be helpful for you?
6. Is there a Bible verse or a line about gladness or joy from the sermon that you like that you can “put on your refrigerator” to remember and encourage you?